

Follow Me
Mark 8:27-38
February 25, 2018

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: If any want to come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”

Yep...this passage again. I say this because this particular invitation from Jesus comes up in the Lectionary most every year about this time...either from Matthew's Gospel or Luke's Gospel...or, as today, from Mark's Gospel. I also say it because I think many of you certainly know that this is my favorite text in all of Scripture. I don't mean "favorite" as in it gives me warm fuzzies. These words are most challenging...and most important. It is my opinion—and let me emphasize that I am offering this only as my opinion—that no text in all of Scripture captures the truth that “it is all about Jesus” as does this one. Feel free to disagree. In my now forty-one years of preaching, I have preached on many passages. But I have preached on this one more than any other. Don't worry...I generally find something new to add.

Okay. Last week we considered the Lectionary's Old Testament lesson. Noah and the ark. Now I'm sure some of you have heard a comedian or two give their take on that account. And...if you take a step back...I could see some humor in it. I mean...use your imagination. This older gentleman out in his backyard building a huge boat. I mean it took a long time to build it. Neighbors and friends maybe wandered by and asked Noah what he was up to. Noah told them what God had told him...and there was that part about gathering up the animals and they would float around for a long time. Do you think one or two of his buddies may have laughed a bit and told him he might want to lay off the wine? What Noah was asked to do does seem unreasonable.

The Old Testament lesson for today concerns the covenant God made with Abraham.

You know that story. God promised Abraham he would have many descendants and become a great nation and all that. Thing was Abraham and his wife Sarah were not getting any younger and many years passed between the time when God first made that promise and the time when the promise was fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah were, in fact, getting older. Paul says right in the book of Romans, chapter four, that Abraham's body was as good as dead since he was a hundred years old. That's Paul talking...not me. So when God reminded Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son and become this great nation, Abraham laughed. Sarah laughed. Kind of funny. Unreasonable.

Now I am fully aware of the truth that God's ways are higher than our ways...and God's thoughts higher than our thoughts. So some of God's higher thoughts seem unreasonable to our lower minds. Not making sense. Unreasonable. Hold onto that thought. We may come back to it.

Back to our Gospel text. Our reading says in verse thirty-one that Jesus began to teach about his death. It says, “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” Must suffer. Must be killed. Like...there was no choice here. He began to teach these things. To this point Jesus had said nothing about his death. Check out Mark's Gospel from the beginning until chapter eight and verse thirty. Not one word about his death.

So what had he been doing and teaching? As you have heard me say a time or two before, he had been teaching the people about who he was. He told stories. He performed awesome works of power. Miracles. All of this was done

with the purpose of letting the people know who he was. Jesus...the Messiah...the Son of God.

All this teaching ends in Mark's Gospel with the healing of this blind man from Bethsaida. It was a rather unusual miracle in that it seems to be the only one of Jesus' miracles that didn't take the first time. Jesus spit in the man's eyes. Jesus touched the man. Jesus asked him if he could see anything. The man said he saw people...but he didn't see too clearly. The people looked like trees walking around. So Jesus had to touch the man a second time. This little irreverent part of me wants to say that second touch was Jesus wiping the spit out of the guy's eyes. Forgive me that. But then the man could see. A second touch was needed.

It was then when Jesus asked his disciples who the people were saying he was. He'd been teaching who he was. What were the people saying? The disciples told him that some were saying Jesus was John the Baptist; others said he was Elijah; still others said he was one of the other prophets.

Then he asked his disciples, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Jesus spent more time with his disciples—teaching them who he was. What did they have to say? Peter gave the correct answer. Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior of the world...the confession on which the Church is built.

Having received the correct answer, Jesus switched gears. He moved from teaching about who he was into teaching about what he had come to do: die and rise. Peter rebuked Jesus and said this would not happen. Jesus, in no uncertain terms, rebuked Peter. You know what? Peter was just like that blind man. He saw, but he didn't see clearly. He needed a second touch.

We could all use that second touch from time to time. What is it we need to see clearly? Well...it is one thing to confess Jesus as our Savior; that'll certainly get us "saved". But there is more when it comes really to following Jesus.

Okay. So let's put ourselves into the skin of those disciples. First century Palestine. They had

been waiting for this Messiah...the One promised in their Scriptures. The wait had been going on for hundreds of years. They thought this Messiah would come and set Israel free. You know all this. They thought this Messiah would restore Israel as a nation. They thought this Messiah would march right into Jerusalem and go right to the palace or wherever it was the Roman officials resided. He would kick them out. There would be a battle...swords and bloodshed. They wondered what was taking so long.

We know all these years later that Jesus did not go to the place of political power. He went to the temple...the place of religious power. He threw out a few folks there. There was bloodshed. But only one person shed any blood. Jesus.

So Jesus told those disciples he was going to Jerusalem to die. Well...to those disciples that was almost laughable. Big funny. They might die for him in battle, but the Messiah would not die. What's more, he told them if they wanted to follow him now...from that point on...see, it had been pretty cool to this point to be in the Messiah's inner circle...but if they wanted to follow him now, they would have to be willing to walk the same path. They would have to abandon their notion of maybe getting seats of honor on the right and the left of the Messiah. They would have to deny themselves and take up their own cross and walk in his steps. So Peter said, my paraphrase, "Come on, Jesus. Stop joking around. Get real. That is not going to happen." That was not how it was supposed to go. What Jesus said was unreasonable.

The text says Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and then rebuked Peter. He looked at all his disciples and issued the rebuke. Peter did the talking, but he said what they were all thinking. The disciples saw a little bit, but they needed to see more clearly. They understood a little bit what their Scriptures said about the Messiah, but they needed their eyes opened more.

Here's the deal. We read of all these things God invited people to do. Noah and building a big boat. Abraham and Sarah having a child in their beyond-having-a-child years. Laughable.

Unreasonable. But they did it. They believed. Jesus walked along the lakeshore and he saw Peter and Andrew and James and John, and he invited them to follow him. They left everything and followed him. That was fairly easy compared to today's invitation to follow.

It took faith. There are many ways to define faith. Hebrews, chapter eleven opens with a pretty good definition. Here's one you have maybe heard. Mike Zimmer, the coach of the Vikings, offered this definition. He said that faith is belief without proof. Belief without proof. Okay, there is a bit lacking in that definition, but you get the point. When I made my decision to follow Jesus as my Savior, I just did it. I didn't understand much. You know what I am saying. Those folks who talked to me about Jesus...they couldn't prove anything. I just took that step of faith...the first touch I received from Jesus. Just as those disciples did when Jesus issued his first invitation to them.

Well, here is another definition. This is what I want to leave us with today. Let me say that it is not always easy being a follower. In fact, in society in general being a follower is not always seen as a positive thing. It is sometimes discouraged. We tell children—and we should—not to follow the crowd. They are to learn to be independent and their own people. There are all kinds of books on how to be a good leader. Has anyone ever read a book on how to be a good follower? I have. The Bible. In it we are invited to follow Jesus and we are told what a follower of Jesus looks like and the Bible is the light on that path of following Jesus.

We follow Jesus even when some of the things Jesus asks us to do seem laughable and unreasonable. You know...crazy stuff like praying for our enemies...and turning the other cheek...and loving everyone...and welcoming strangers...and considering others as better than ourselves...and denying ourselves...and taking up our own cross. Or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in his wonderful book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."

So here is that other definition of faith: faith is following Jesus without reservation. Faith is living for Jesus every moment of every day with no second thoughts. Obedience without reservation. That is the invitation today. Ask Jesus for a second touch...a third touch...so that the mist is removed from our eyes...and we see clearly...and then follow him all the way where he leads us...all the way to the cross...without one glance backwards.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If any want to come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."